

Pakistan: Day One

We arrived in Islamabad early Thursday in the midst of a crisp, Pakistan December morning. After a briefing at the American Embassy, we headed out to visit a fundamentalist Islamic school for men ages 15-25 called a Madrassa. In Pakistan, there are some 15,000 such schools, many of which would never allow westerners to visit. The Madrassa we visited was quite different and the leader of that spiritual sect, the religious leadership, the teachers and the students were very kind and hospitable to us. They spoke with great kindness of the common ground of faith in God, family and economic opportunity to which our peoples aspire. In addition to very traditional Islamic spiritual education, they showed us a wonderful curriculum that included mathematics, science, language, history and computer programming. These people are clearly dedicated to their vocation and their students and we were all deeply moved by their hospitality and gracious reception.

We then made our way to an elementary school supported by American tax dollars through the USAID program. It was the highlight of our day. While we later met with Pakistan Prime Minister Shaukat Azziz, sitting on the floor with 5-year-olds at this school for underprivileged children was my favorite moment by far! As their parents stood close by, here were four members of Congress, sitting on the floor, surrounded by children and drawing pictures! They taught us their words for “tree,” “rabbit” and how to say “my name is,” and when we spoke in their tongue they all applauded with their little hands in delight. It was a wonderful moment for this father of three little children to remember that, wherever you are on the earth, parents are parents and kids are kids. The American people are making a difference at this little school and hundreds like it across Pakistan.

After a formal meeting with the Prime Minister and his cabinet, our convoy headed out of Islamabad’s urban familiarity into what many call “the real Pakistan,” on our three-hour drive to Peshawar on the border of Afghanistan. The terrain and the people are hard in appearance and smoke obscures much of the landscape from campfires burning across the landscape. 150 million people in Pakistan live in the crowded hamlets we passed, many in breathtaking poverty. We arrived in the dark on the bustling streets of Peshawar, an ancient city which sits on the south end of the Khyber Pass, the geological region through which Alexander the Great’s armies passed thousands of years ago.

Our small delegation shared an intimate meal with seven tribal leaders from the region of Pakistan known as Waziristan. This is a rather notorious and hard area, defined by ancient tribal alliances and walled cities whose population shuns contact with the outside world. It is also the region most often cited as the hiding place of Osama bin Laden. We spoke of the challenges that these leaders and their families faced in the wake of the war in Afghanistan. We spoke of their view of America, China and Russia. And we spoke of Osama bin Laden.

With great humility, they expressed grief for the horrors of 9-11 and denounced al Qaeda and its leader for that dastardly attack. They assured us that they desired only to live in peace and that their ancient faith of Islam was a faith of peace. Toward the end of the meal, I asked them about the hunt for bin Laden and if they believed he and his cohorts were hiding in their region. They became quite animated as they replied, through an interpreter, “what would we want with him?”

and “why would we want someone like him in our villages?” They said there was no hunt for bin Laden in Waziristan because he was not there, adding, “If we were to find him, we would kill him.” It was a frank, and direct discussion with men who lead some six million Pakistanis and they were adamant in condemning bin Laden and asking for a greater partnership with America. One of the tribal leaders invited me to visit Waziristan, adding “you will come under my protection, my responsibility, and you can go wherever you like”. I told him I was humbled by his invitation and would carry his gracious words back with me to Capitol Hill.

Day one ended in Pakistan as it had begun, in darkness. But our little delegation of American lawmakers was enlightened by the courage, humanity and hospitality we had encountered. There is hope in this place for their people and ours.

- Rep. Mike Pence, Peshawar, Pakistan